

Securing peace : NATO should take the lead role in Iraq

By Frederick Bonnart, International Herald Tribune

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The American plan for Iraq is advancing rapidly along its ordained steps. Early Monday morning the Iraqi Governing Council approved an interim constitution intended to underpin the Iraqi state from June 30, when Washington plans to hand over sovereignty to the Iraqis, until a permanent constitution is written following end-of-year elections. It would be naïve, however, to believe that even if all these measures were successfully completed on time, an interim government would be able to maintain internal security without massive external help.

Having realized this, Washington is looking to its allies for assistance. On the face of it, NATO seems made for the task. The alliance has already extended its sphere of action far beyond the boundaries of the treaty nations; with intervention in Iraq, it would regain its former centrality as the basic Western security organization. This would also help to heal the rift among the allies over the Iraq war, since all the allies agree that, regardless of their previous divergences, Iraq cannot be allowed to descend into chaos.

Before NATO took on this job, however, some basic conditions would have to be met. With NATO deployed in the Balkans and Afghanistan, as well as individual national military actions in support of the United Nations, military forces are in short supply. The United States would still have to furnish the biggest troop element, but the Europeans would have to show that they are now making real efforts to provide the necessary resources for the new tasks to which they have committed themselves.

In its turn, the Bush administration would have to accept that the United States is one of NATO's 19 member states, which reach their decisions by consensus. Decisions would have to be taken by NATO's supreme authority, the North Atlantic Council, on which the United States sits together with the other 18 members; U.S. military forces would not act independently but from their place within NATO commands. The image of NATO must not be that of an auxiliary in American undertakings.

In Afghanistan, NATO came in as an afterthought, brought in with a United Nations mandate following the American action after the Sept. 11 attacks. At first NATO's role was only to guarantee security in Kabul, relieving American forces to concentrate on attacking Taliban remnants under Operation Enduring Freedom. Thereafter, provincial reconstruction teams were gradually provided by individual nations to help establish

normal life in outlying provinces. These are now to be placed under the command of NATO, and, in due course, so will Operation Enduring Freedom, thereby establishing a single overall allied command for Afghanistan. But NATO could only achieve the necessary primacy by a gradual assumption of responsibilities.

The same may now happen with Iraq. The initial American operation, with a sizeable British contingent, has been joined by several other nations, including individual NATO members, with limited numbers of troops. The biggest of these is the Polish contingent, which controls a small division including other national elements. Poland, new to NATO, had asked for the organization's assistance to set up its command. This was given mainly in the form of advice, as well as some intelligence and communications specialists. All are under U.S. Central Command, which exercises authority over all coalition forces in Iraq.

Discussions for a possible NATO role are at an exploratory stage at present. An agreed precondition is a request for its intervention from a recognized Iraqi government, and a mandate from the United Nations. One option being considered is for the organization to take over the Polish commitment. Although the NATO Council would then exercise command of this allied division, such a mission should be categorically resisted. Not only would it create two separate chains of command, but it would place NATO into a secondary place, behind the all-powerful American command responsible for the overall security mission in Iraq.

NATO should take on the task of making Iraq secure, but only in the lead role. Iraq, the United States and the alliance have much to gain by this. If an international organization was in charge, instead of what is seen as an American military occupation, internal resistance would abate, and much of the weight and most of the opprobrium would be lifted from American shoulders. NATO would be confirmed as the primary international peacekeeper, and its unchanging role as the essential Western security organization would be recognized once more.

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